

# Facets of Women's Migration

ELISABETTA DI GIOVANNI

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Edited by

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This volume presents original and high quality contributions on women's migration from several different perspectives. Because of its complex nature, this topic has been examined in order to bring into dialogue a variety of theoretical perspectives, within an interdisciplinary context which includes not only sociology, anthropology, psychology and political geography, but also linguistics and literature. As the papers present the results of research projects which refer to specific geographical contexts, the collection is structured around the diverse destinations of the migrations here considered: namely, the Italian city of Palermo, Italy and Europe.

All the papers were presented during the sixth edition of the "Migration, Human Rights and Democracy" Summer School, organized by the University of Palermo, Italy, in September 2012, which every year focuses on specific topics concerning questions of migration and human motilities in the contemporary world.

**Elisabetta di Giovanni** (born 1973) graduated with honours in Modern Italian Literature from the University of Palermo in 1995 and obtained a PhD in "Humankind and Environment" in 1999. During the PhD program, her research focused on the nature-culture relationship from a socio-anthropological perspective. Between 2003 and 2006, she conducted a Research Fellowship in Religious Anthropology at the University of Palermo. She has been Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Palermo since 2006. She teaches Folklore Studies and is a member of the PhD program in "Teacher Training". She is a member of the Scientific Committee of the Sociology of Religion section of the Italian Sociology Association. While also interested in migrant communities and host society relationship, religious anthropology, patronage, and religiosity in youth, currently her research and writing is devoted to Roma studies.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# ETHNICALLY UNPRIVILEGED: SOME ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON ROMA WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY ITALY

ELISABETTA DI GIOVANNI

In the contemporary world there are a lot of interethnic conflicts which are characterized by serious violations of human rights, above all in the Afro-Asiatic continent. In the Western context, there is a continuous migratory flow which is labelled by the dominant society as an invasion, a threat to the collective sense of safety. Among these phenomena of supposed violation, there is the “intrusion” of Gypsies that constitute a mosaic of ethnic subgroups, a world of worlds (Piasere 1999). They are used to living in the shade, surviving in the interstices of the majority society, and have got used to leading a life characterized by social mimicry (Romania 2004; Di Giovanni 2012); they have tried to keep the typical cultural traits of a simple society, which is also subaltern and marginal, with a strong spirit of coping. Unlike other migrants, however, “Gypsies” do not try to assimilate the host society’s characteristics; simply, they float in it.

As we know, especially in Italy, EU-Roma citizens live in ghettos, in marginalized conditions inside urban contexts, not always in the peripheral parts of the cities. Every day they face new forms of racism and xenophobic tendencies that at the moment are very alive, in particular, against Roma citizens or Gypsies/Nomads (anti-Gypsyism). We assist in the increasing marginalization and impoverishment of these population groups, who are considered unable to adapt to the new socio-economic system: among them, millions of Roma, for whom chronic unemployment and poverty have become the norm (Sigona and Treheran 2009; 2011). The perception of Roma/Gypsies/Nomads is extremely negative in all European societies, especially if compared to that of other minority groups.

This chapter focuses on the conditions of extreme poverty and uncertainty of Roma women in Italy, and on the consequences they have on their children. The present analysis starts from the living context and from the organizing of families in ghettos. Finally, it proceeds to the women's economic activity and to the debate on the ethnicity of this community.

## **Practising Segregation in Italian Ghettos**

According to recent Italian government data, in Italy there are about 160,000 "Gypsies" (Ministero dell'Interno 2008), while according to the association *Opera nomadi's* data there are about 150,000–180,000. The most important element is their presence in Rome: there are 7,177 (last data is of 2010), living in several settlements; most of them are "tolerated" camps of segregation, where adults and children live in precarious and substandard conditions. In August 2013, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) condemned once again the targeted evictions of Roma and Sinti communities which have taken place in Italy since 2008:

forced evictions have rendered several Roma and Sinti families homeless and [the Committee] regrets the ways in which security personnel and video-controlled access to some of these camps are used. As indicated in its previous concluding observations, the Committee is concerned that the Roma, Sinti and Camminanti populations, both citizens and non-citizens, are living in a situation of de facto segregation from the rest of the population in camps that often lack access to the most basic facilities. The Committee takes note of the statement of the delegation on the intention to apply a new housing policy in favor of Roma and Sinti. (CERD 2013: n. 4, para 1)

Between 2009 and August 2013, Amnesty International visited six out of the eight authorized camps in Rome, some of them several times, as well as the camp of Tor de' Cenci, which was closed down in September 2012. The visits were carried out in order to document the living conditions in these camps and violations of the human rights of the Romani communities there allocated. This was done in correspondence with local and national authorities and international human rights bodies. Housing is not adequate if it is cut off from employment opportunities, health-care services, schools, childcare centres, and other social facilities, or if located in polluted or dangerous areas. Romani women feel completely cut off from services, especially health services, finding it very

expensive to shop for food and pay for transport for long journeys; very rarely are Romani women found to drive. According to Amnesty International:

To aggravate the discrimination to which Roma have been subjected, living conditions in authorized camps have been and remain very poor, as international human rights bodies have repeatedly noted. In authorized camps, severe overcrowding robs individuals of any privacy, families of the space for intimacy and children of the possibility to play and concentrate on their homework. Poor, in many cases dire, living conditions – including inadequate access to water and electricity, blocked sewers, insufficient waste removal, damaged structures and insect infestations – threaten health and undermine the human dignity of residents. Opaque regulations and procedures applicable inside the camps deprive residents of the equal protection of the law and of a minimum degree of security of tenure over their home, as they can be expelled or evicted without legal safeguards. Gates guarded by “wardens” at the entrance of authorized camps, very poor public transport connections and a service of coaches for Romani children only, taking them from the camp to school and back inside the camp every day, contribute to ensure and perpetuate the social exclusion of these families. (2013: 6)

Moreover, it is evident that Roma women have poorer health conditions compared with Roma men and the majority of women in wider society. The barriers are primarily poverty combined with external discrimination against Roma women in the health sector on the grounds of gender, ethnic origin, and poor socioeconomic conditions. Other limits to women’s access to adequate health care are malnutrition, remote and poor housing conditions, frequent pregnancies and abortions, hard working conditions, illiteracy, limited access to health information, and lack of identity cards (Unicef 2011).

In recent years, and up until the present day, episodes of forced evictions have been frequent, and local Italian municipalities have not been able to provide adequate alternative housing for these communities. The last episode of forced evictions happened on 26 November 2013, in Milan, where two Roma camps were evicted and 600 people were removed from the two areas in the northern part of the city. A few hours after the dismantling, however, the problem seemed to be far from solved: in fact, while 250 people accepted the alternative proposals of the municipality, 350 disappeared in the area. The destruction or seizure of property owned by the Roma, as if it were always and only from the proceeds of criminal activities, and the physical and psychological

violence perpetrated against women and even children continue to be frequent.

Generally, Roma groups resettle in the urban context, preferring this to peripheries. Their marginality is expressed living in the metaphorical margins of the host society; the choice of a suitable area for their settlement depends on a strategic proximity to major territorial services (urban transport, water supply, medical health, school).

In the last thirty years “Italian” Roma, born in Italy but not recognized as such, have been camouflaged. Some have chosen council housing or, more frequently, accommodation such as shacks that are built in areas that the municipality has allocated to them more or less explicitly. Most of them live in the ghetto areas, or in metal containers, trailers, or wooden barracks also built along the banks of rivers, as in Rome for example. In winter, within each barrack or *kampina* there is a stove, while outside a fire is lit. It has a very strong meaning from a social point of view, because it defines the geographical and relational borders of its members. Especially in winter, the *kampina* represents a symbolic space to sit together, in a circle, choosing with which other families to spend their time. This is clear from the ethnographical observation conducted both among Roma Xoraxane in Turin (Saletti Salza 2003) and in Palermo (Di Giovanni 2007). Usually the women and younger children speak, men play cards, and the children watch television. The entrance to the barrack faces the front or side of the other homes in the extended family. The location of the door is not casual, because symbolically the entrance of the *kampina* does not face the courtyard of those whose members are not in contact with or related to the family.

Inside, the barrack has one large space; sometimes there is a second room, usually devoted to parents. There is not a space for children, who may move all over the house. They are used to sleeping with their parents until they are eight years old; then they will sleep in another bed or on a sofa with other siblings. Younger children are often in the arms of their mother or elder sister, for whom a hammock is reserved, hung in the barrack. The child is free to move; he/she does not spend the day in the *kampina*, where eating and sleeping occur, because their social life takes place in the courtyard (*drustvo*). The child is educated to assume a particular social role both in the ghetto, that is a familiar environment, and outside. For example, the school is one of the places where the child has the opportunity to learn the social norms of the non-Roma. In fact, from when the child is young, the relationship with the world outside the camp is mediated by the social figure of the mother, when she goes out to beg (*mangel*). Growing up, the male child will go to the city alone or with his

peer group. So will the girls, going to the city into groups to socialize or to work. Non-Roma physical spaces and symbolic places (i.e. institutional ones) are populated recognizing a different function. Generally, all the adults of the community are responsible for all the children, even if they are not their own and are not part of their extended family. The adult has a protective duty towards the child, inside and outside the camp, among the non-Roma spaces, even when there are quarrels between families. Children are never left alone, at least one adult taking care of them. Usually the educative figures of reference are those living in the same courtyard, such as for example a cousin or an aunt. The Gypsy does not exist outside his family; his whole life is based around his family. Choices involve the whole family group, because the family provides material and psychological assistance to its members; it satisfies all economic needs and those of sociality and transmission of culture; therefore the family is present in all the most important moments of the single individual. Family ties are structured through a concentric system, so the nuclear family is strictly related to the extended one, which, in its turn, is related to the ethnic-linguistic group of reference.

As Goffman has pointed out, those who undergo a process of stigmatization end up interiorizing the stigma, continuing the necessary actions to trace their “moral career” in a direction which is inevitably doomed. The construction of identity takes place through the encounter with the other’s routine, through a process of deconstruction and construction of the limits of the self and the other (1963, 32). But a preliminary passage is necessary in becoming able to elaborate one’s identity, taking the right distance from the stereotype image they themselves have by now interiorized. According to Goffman, this is the destiny of all minorities suffering from a strong disadvantage in relation to the host community. The social stigma, in fact, strengthens itself because of their condition and automatically classifies the individual in the lowest social hierarchical strata, inasmuch as he/she is inferior because he/she is different and responsible for his/her own uneasiness.

This happens among Roma communities because the main consequence of their status of isolation is the atrophy of their social potential, which occurs in the absence/lack of relationships with *Gagé*. The lack of relations with the host society leads Roma to withdraw more and more into themselves and into their own world, so that the dimension of time coincides with the daily household chores and attending to people’s own community only. Some of them have nothing to do during the day and spend their time sleeping. This state of passivity reveals the conviction not to be masters of their own destiny and having, instead, to wait for other

answers to their problems. So, there is a self-perpetuating system of a continuous attitude of waiting for welfare, which, in their opinion, is due to them; therefore they claim against the *Gagé*.

In Italy, the “Gypsy problem” is a general phenomenon that affects a collective labelling as inner enemies (Sigona 2005), reproducing stereotypes instead of disrupting this humanitarian emergency.

The urban margins are the arena in which the relationship between Roma and Italians takes place, shaped by the condition of “permanent emergency”. The urban level is where the “problem” is localized and where the space for dialogue and/or conflict can be found. In such a context, the camp becomes a limitation, if not an obstacle, to the relational space, making contact more difficult between groups living in the same community. (Sigona 2005, 750)

### **Roma Women’s Underground Economy**

Roma citizens continuously cross the dominant groups’ borders both physically and metaphorically, being obliged to live as refugees in European complex societies, due to their ethnicization (Di Giovanni 2012). They usually avoid the process of assimilation and operate social mimicry in urban spaces, especially when many Gypsy women go out *to work*, that is for begging (*manghel*). During my ethnographical research (2006–2010), I observed Roma women coming out of the camp, usually to reach their begging area in the town of Palermo (Italy): usually standing at traffic lights, outside a church, or outside supermarkets, etc. Otherwise, it is usual to see one or several Gypsy women going together to gather clothes or food in front of a supermarket with their children, when the children do not go to school.

In Roma families this kind of informal work is usually solely for women. As to their economic activity, Piasere noted that Muslim Roma in Italy fit a charitable ideology conforming to that of many Italian Catholics (1987), therefore, applying economic categories which are different from Western ones. The so called “Gypsies” contrive new economic perspectives: begging is separated from poverty and is, rather, considered as a form of marketing in its literary meaning of “bargaining” (Piasere 2000, 418).

Through participant observation it is possible to observe this behaviour as the “Gypsy woman beggar” moves among *Gagé*. She may stop in a place waiting for free donations or go door to door. Before begging, she enters the *Gagé* world. In fact, it is when a Gypsy woman “asks” that non-Roma people notice her physical presence. The interaction is sought face-



to-face, bold or humble; her strategy consists of an accusation of the evils of the world, sometimes distant evils of the world, pointing out the non-Roma's assumed guilt and their missing sense of sharing. The most striking example is given by the Roma who beg using the technique of the written request in the form of a poster.

Begging is an activity considered disgraceful in European cultures, strictly related to shame, which plays a key role in internal social control. The Gypsies have not erased it, but they have defined the boundaries in a different way from the *Gagé*. Asking other Roma is not shameful, even amongst those acquainted with each other. This form of begging differs from other communities; it involves asking without expectation of a return, and professing subordination to the person asked. While the gift provides a relationship one-to-one, begging is a relation one-to-many (Piasere 2000, 424).

From qualitative interviews conducted in Palermo (southern Italy), it was found that Roma women feel safe in the camp and in their begging area but not during the journey, because they could be stopped by the police. As a consequence, I suggest their social and underground economic relationships have informal borders: going out of this metaphorically delimited area represents a lack of referential borders. For Roma women their begging area in an urban context has two kinds of function: economic (to assure daily income through an informal way of making money), and social (managing useful information and social support especially for physical health matters).

## Conclusions

Roma women do not hide their ethnicity, while Gypsy youth seems to mask its ethnic culture. This confirms that the border depends on how different people feel it. Women maintain their ethnicity; youth operates a dynamic of social mimicry. So, the continuous fluctuation of young Roma as suspended particles in their attempt to achieve social inclusion is based on masking their original culture. They don't openly refuse their family heritage or their ethnicity, but they look for a different means of inclusion. Roma women

experience intersectional/multiple forms of discrimination which can be argued to have external as well as internal dimensions. The multiple forms of discrimination that Roma women experience are crosscutting factors that influence how women experience, and act according to, not only their own situation but also the possibilities that they foresee for their children. (Unicef 2011, 42)

Very often they express this vital need of acceptance by an inappropriate wrong process of assimilation of consumerist lifestyles, adapting themselves in the dominant society by performing an identity strategy of passing for non Roma. Finally, the Roma's social inclusion in the host society is difficult and far from being attained. Although they are EU-citizens, the diffused anti-Gypsyism and contemporary xenophobic phenomena push Roma societies to take refuge in urban interstices, crossing back and forth over imaginary borders and borderlands inside Western towns. In the light of these dynamics, in Europe, and especially in Italy, Roma groups exhibit transculturality. Because of their ethnic "super-diversity" (Vertovec 2007), Gypsies are very good at surfing from one cultural-physical border to another, even preserving their cultural heritage and performing an identity strategy. From this perspective, Roma communities seem to perfectly win the cross-cultural challenge of modernity.

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